Earth-Friendly Gardening & Landscaping

The GreenMan

The Roots (& Tubers) of Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is fast approaching, a holiday full of swirling memories and preparations, like so many colorful autumn leaves. It's a celebration of family and food and delightful traditions. And it can be a reminder that our traditions are actually anything but traditional.

I was rather young when I first learned that my family's traditional Thanksgiving dinner was not the universal norm. We dined on turkey and stuffing, potatoes, gravy, sweet potatoes, cranberries, and pumpkin pie. Normal enough. However, elsewhere in the colonies, specifically Brooklyn, our Italian neighbors celebrated with their traditional Thanksgiving lasagna and antipasto platter.

Later, my wife and in-laws introduced me to the traditional Baltimore side dish of sauerkraut. Curiously, the denizens of Charm City have somehow failed to draw the logical connection between sauerkraut and hot dogs at ball games, but that's another story.

For the most part, we imagine Thanksgiving as a timeless tableau, a generous feast first celebrated by grateful Pilgrims and kind-spirited Native Americans at the Plymouth Colony in 1641. And we generally envision an assortment of foods similar to our "traditional" Thursday spread, sauerkraut notwithstanding.

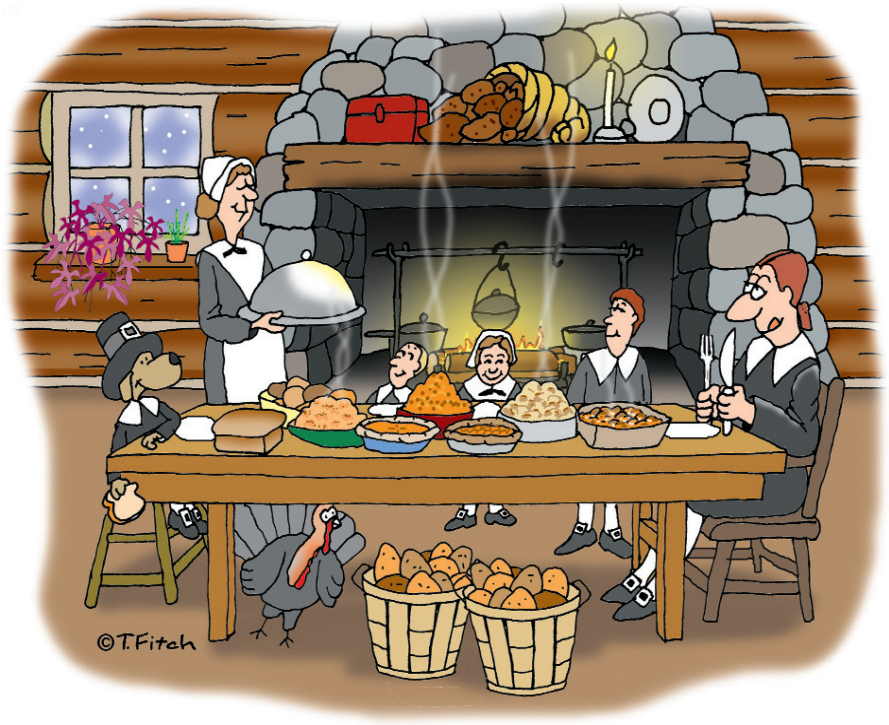
Alas, we are savoring more of myth than reality. The first Thanksgiving observance actually took place in Newfoundland, Canada, in 1578, almost 50 years before Plymouth. And when the Separatists of Plymouth finally did celebrate their "First Thanksgiving," it was more likely held near the end of July a couple years later.

Don't worry, however, there was undoubtedly a harvest celebration in 1621, and we can always trace our tradition to that event. But don't expect any mashed potatoes or cranberry sauce.

Written accounts from the period indicate that such feasts included venison, mussels, cod, and herring. What, no turkey? It is possible that wild turkey (the game bird, not the bourbon) was served, although duck, goose, and crane were more likely.

Bad news concerning sweet potatoes: Christopher Columbus may have brought the colorful tuber back to Europe in the late 15th century, but in 1621 no one in New England was enjoying baked sweet potatoes drizzled with maple syrup. Likewise for potatoes, the world's favorite root crop. Boiled, baked, or mashed, the noble spud would not appear on New World tables for another 100 years or more. Fortunately, Native Americans had introduced the settlers to pumpkins and to numerous varieties of squash.

And while cranberry sauce may not have been available, as sugar was not to be had, the Native Americans would have had cranberries on hand. In fact, they often mixed the berries into their traditional travel food, pemmican, sort of a cross between beef jerky and granola bars. Moreover, it has been suggested that Indians may have taught the colonists to tame the tartness of the berry by boiling it



along with maple syrup, which may have been the inspiration for cranberry sauce itself.

The colorful cranberry has almost as important a role in American agriculture as it does on the dinner table. Cranberry, along with the Concord grape and the blueberry, is one of the few native fruits commercially grown.

The plant's name is traced to *Crane-berry* in the early 17th century, either because cranes were noted gobbling their way through the cranberry bogs, or, more colorfully, because the vine's discrete pink flowers in spring resemble the head and bill of a Sandhill crane, or the scarlet *lores* (patch) above the crane's eye.

Today, while cranberries are grown throughout North America, nearly half the total harvest originates in the bogs of Massachusetts. It seems to be a tradition that lives on.

And while the lowly potato is a relative newcomer to our traditional feast, its journey to our table was as difficult and tenuous as airport, train, and highway traffic the night before Thanksgiving.

Potatoes (*Solanum tuberosum*) were brought back to the "Old Country" some 50 years after Columbus made landfall. Like the tomato, it is another South and Central American member of the *Solanacaea* or deadly "Nightshade" family. And, like the tomato, potatoes were considered to contain aphrodisiac properties, on the one hand, or cause leprosy — which was also associated with unbridled carnal activity. There are varied accounts of potatoes returning to the new world in the Virginia colonies as early as the 1630s, or to New England via Irish immigrants in the early 18th century.

More recently, in developed countries, 99 percent of all root crop production is in potatoes. And why not? They are famously high in fiber, carbohydrates, and protein, as well as vitamins B and C, and essential minerals such as magnesium, zinc, iron, and copper.

For the most part, they are relatively easy to grow, with hundreds of cultivars available, perfect for raised beds or even containers and tubs. For the adventurous gardener, russet or white potatoes might be all well and good, but what about the dazzling array of heirloom varieties, ranging from 'Yellow Finn' and 'German Yellow,' to red-skinned 'Pontiac' and 'Red Norland,' or even 'All Blue' and 'Purple Peruvian?' After all, what could be more traditional than old-fashioned heirloom varieties?

Sweet potatoes introduce another tradition: the annual confusion between sweet potatoes and yams. For the record, the so-called "true yams" (*Dioscorea spp.*) are actually of West African or Asian origin, and they are dry, white, and quite starchy — unlike the sweeter, delectable flesh of sweet potatoes with their deep yellow or reddish-orange tubers.

Sweet potato (*Ipomoea batatus*) is related to bindweed or morning glory, as its fast-growing vines will attest, and originated in Central or South America, possibly Brazil, Peru, or Equador.

There are generally two types of sweet potato, a dry-fleshed variety with white flesh, best grown in colder climates (and far too yam-like for comfort), and the moist-flesh or southern variety with which we're happily familiar. Interestingly, the majority of sweet potatoes are grown in China, while it's the second most important crop in Japan, where it is used to produce starch, wine, and alcohol. At home, nearly 30 percent of the sweet potatoes grown in the U.S. are cultivated in North Carolina, which also goes a long way to explain the South's fondness for sweet potato, rather than pumpkin, pie.

Sweet potatoes can be rather versatile in the home garden. They can be cultivated normally, like potatoes, or even used as either an attractive ground cover, or interspersed in hanging baskets with trailing flowers. No promises, but the vines also infrequently produce pink flowers. In addition, by way of warning, I once surprised myself to find about two pounds of tubers growing in a hanging basket one fall season. I had only planted the vines to provide a light green contrast to other, darker foliage, little expecting a side dish.

You can start your sweet potato plantation by simply buying "slips" from local nurseries and garden centers, or through catalogs, for more unusual cultivars. About 25 slips will suffice for a family of four. You can also propagate your own from tubers which you or a neighbor have successfully overwintered from the garden. Don't try to use store-bought tubers, as they are frequently treated with a compound precisely to prevent sprouting. Set your sweet potato in a glass of water, with one-third submerged. When the young sprouts are about six inches long, pull them off (don't cut them) and set them in water or moist sand until a dense mat of roots are formed. You can transplant them outdoors a few weeks after the last threat of frost. And, by the way, sprouting sweet potatoes is great fun for younger children. Many a school windowsill is covered with vines every spring.

Overall, sweet potato vines can grow up to four feet or more, although there are several cultivars with compact growth habits and shorter vines, which are ideally suited for barrels or patio containers, including 'Bunch Porto Rico' and 'Vardaman.'

Other popular standard varieties include 'Allgold', 'Heart-o-gold,' 'Nancy Hall' 'Centennial,' high-yielding'Beauregard,' 'Jewel,' 'Yellow Jersey,' and'Southern Delight.'

And while sweet potatoes are an important part of our Thanksgiving tradition, they are gaining even more status as an important source of nutrition, with fiber, vitamins A and C, iron and calcium, antioxidants, and beta carotene. In fact, one sweet potato provides half the recommended daily allowance of beta carotene. It's everything you need for a happy — *and healthy* — holiday. Just watch out for those tiny marshmallows!

The GreenMan Show is produced for County Cable Montgomery by the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) and the Office of Public Information. It airs daily on Cable Channel 6 and can also be viewed on the Internet. For a complete schedule and online access, visit **www.greenmanshow.com.**

Joe Keyser is the author of the GreenMan column for the *Gazette Newspapers* in Maryland, and also host of The Greenman Show. A downloadable library of previous environmental articles. columns, and reviews are available online at greenman.askdep.com. Print copies are also available by contacting DEP at the following locations:

Montgomery County Department of Environmental Protection
255 Rockville Pike, Suite 120
Rockville, MD 20850
240.777.7770 fax 240.777.7765
email: help@askdep.com
www.askdep.com